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ABSTRACT

Massachusetts is a newcomer to teacher testing, and prospective teachers in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts were not tested until April 1998. The unintended consequences of the state's teacher testing policy are examined through a qualitative case study and a document review of media reports, higher education institution reports, in-house activities at one college, and a review of the teacher certification testing literature. The intent of the Massachusetts program makes sense, but nearly 60% of prospective teachers failed the first test. Only 6 of the state's 55 certified programs reached the 80% pass rate required to retain accreditation. In the wake of these findings, teacher preparation programs are beginning to teach to the test. In addition, colleges may be reducing their applicant pools in order to increase their pass rates. Overall, the weight of the test may be changing what and how teacher education programs teach in ways that may not be in the long-term best interest of new teachers or their future students. The degrading manner in which teachers have been viewed in the publicity surrounding the low pass rates may discourage college graduates from joining the teaching force, and this impact may be especially severe on minority students. The push for quality is a worthy goal, but it needs to be tempered with the state's demand for more qualified teachers. (Contains 2 tables and 32 references.) (SLD)

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Initial Teacher Certification Testing in Massachusetts: What Has Been Going On? Reflections of a College Professor and a College President

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Initial Teacher Certification Testing in Massachusetts: What Has Been Going On? Reflections of a College Professor and a College President

State policymakers throughout the United States are concerned with improving student performance. As Fuhrman (1999) points out, a primary vehicle for improving student achievement over the last two decades has been through what she calls "new accountability." That is, rather than focusing solely on compliance, policymakers have begun to focus on performance. This push for increased student performance has been coupled with tests that attempt to ensure the basic competency of teachers, and sanctions against teacher preparation colleges based on the performance of their students, in the face of evident problems even from the early history of this particular type of testing (Flippo, 1986).

Massachusetts is a newcomer to teacher testing. Basic competency testing of teachers actually began in the late 1970's. As Anrig (1987) explained:

> Because public officials viewed schools as a large part of the standards problem, they looked for an extended yardstick that could be used legislatively to force higher standards into the educational system. In the name of accountability, state after state enacted testing requirements, first for students and then for teachers. (p.47)

While thirty-nine states now require tests of basic skills for their teacher candidates (Edwards, Education Week, 2000, p. 48), prospective teachers in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts were not tested until April 1998. The Massachusetts Educator Certification Test (MECT) was meant to determine if prospective teachers were "competent" in communication skills and subject knowledge prior to licensure. Initial results made national headlines: Fifty-nine percent of these applicants failed the first round of the tests (and more recently, in October 1999, 53% failed). The result has been that the colleges

that have trained these applicants, the professors who taught them, and the applicants themselves have been under scrutiny ever since.

As a professor and a president, respectively, of a Massachusetts state college, we acknowledge that the goals of this policy indeed seem positive. However, like many state policies, there may be consequences that the crafters of the policy did not intend. Therefore, our focus has been to answer the question: what are the unintended consequences of initial teacher certification testing on teacher colleges and prospective teachers in Massachusetts?

Methods

This is an ongoing query based on a mix of qualitative and quantitative data. We have been using a qualitative case study approach to outline the intent of the Massachusetts initial teacher testing policy and its effect on teacher colleges. Our analysis is based on a document review that includes the following sources: articles from Massachusetts and other newspapers, Massachusetts Department of Education (MDOE) reports, Massachusetts Council of College Presidents reports, Massachusetts state and private higher education institution reports, in-house activities at our college (Fitchburg State), and a review of the teacher certification testing literature.

In order to understand the impact of these tests on the prospective teaching force, we provide selected data taken from the Massachusetts Department of Education cumulative summary results of the first two test administrations (April 1998 and July 1998), and also some data from Fitchburg State College.

Results

Our results are organized into three subsections. We begin by summarizing the apparent intent of the Massachusetts initial teacher-testing program. Second, we review how this policy has affected the practices of teacher preparation colleges. And finally, we examine how this policy has affected the prospective teacher candidates in Massachusetts.

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Teacher Testing in Theory

On June 18, 1993, then Governor William F. Weld signed the Massachusetts Education Reform Act into law. Similar to many states across the U.S., this was an omnibus piece of legislation that would fundamentally change how public education was funded and how educators and students would be held accountable. A major goal of the legislation was to improve teacher quality through entry-level teacher testing. The first tests were administered in April 1998[1].

The intent of the Massachusetts teacher testing program makes a great deal of sense. In theory, these tests were meant simply to weed out those teachers who were not competent in basic literacy and content knowledge. The argument goes, if the teachers cannot read or write (or if they don't have basic content knowledge), how can they teach our children? This common sense rationale has been generally supported since the early 1980's (Edwards, 2000; Goodison, 1986; Hyman, 1984; Vlaanderen, 1982).

Therefore, when nearly 60% of prospective teachers failed the first test in Massachusetts, many policymakers blamed the education colleges. John Silber, then chairman of the Massachusetts Board of Education, the K-12 state oversight body, said that the schools of education were not adequately training their students. Further, state leaders asserted that admission standards to the colleges were too low and the curricula too easy. In an attempt to raise the standards, the State Board of Higher Education, the state oversight body for higher education institutions, proposed to decertify teacher education programs beginning in 2000 if more than 20% of their students had failed the test. In support of the plan, Governor Paul Cellucci said the state needed to "raise the bar for schools of education" (Zernike, 1998, p. A1). Thus, the Massachusetts teacher testing policy was built on two assumptions: 1) that the test would screen out those unfit to teach, and 2) that the

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[1] This teacher testing strategy was coupled with a bill to test veteran teachers and to recruit and retain top-notch teachers. Governor Paul Celluci's proposal to test veteran teachers died in the legislature in 1999. However, the legislature did vote $60 million for recruiting new teachers and retaining exemplary veterans.

threat of sanctions against teacher colleges would serve as an incentive to produce a higher percentage of well-prepared teacher candidates.

Consequences at the Teacher-College Level

As of December 3, 1999, only six of the fifty-five certified programs reached the 80% pass rate required for retaining accreditation (Haywood, Boston Globe, p.22). The Massachusetts Joint Commission on Education Preparation ruled that colleges would have a three year window in which to reach the 80% mark. However, in the wake of this impending sanction we are beginning to observe changes at teacher colleges. First, colleges are beginning to teach to the tests. That is, some programs are changing their curriculum emphases in an effort to prepare students for the material on the MECT. (This has also tended to be a common phenomenon among K-12 schools in high-stakes testing environments.) Fitchburg State College, for example, now requires teacher candidates to pass the literacy portions of the test before they are admitted to the program, and it offers workshops on test preparation. Additionally, much attention is paid at department faculty meetings to address concerns like helping our students do better on the content specialty tests. (For instance, there is now a focus on answering questions like "What can we add to our coursework?") Because of administrative concerns, from outside as well as from inside the College, a passing score on the content tests is being added as another hurdle for admission to the student teaching practica. Other schools, like Fitchburg State, are also toughening admissions standards and adjusting their curriculum and programs (Spakes, internal memo, March 9, 2000). Not everyone agrees, however, on whether all these changes are helpful. If students and faculty worry too much about the content of the tests, and schools tailor their curricula to these tests, will too much attention be diverted away from other (perhaps more important) areas of instruction in education preparation programs?

Many may feel that teaching to the test is not necessarily bad if the test is a good one. Unfortunately, the validity of MECT is questionable. First, it is unclear whether any test can adequately measure the "competency" of a prospective teacher (Piper & Houston,

1980; Zumwalt, 1988). Anrig (1987) argued that not only were standardized tests deficient in measuring the intangibles of a good teacher, e.g., caring and perseverance, but that since most tests focus on minimum skills, they ignore the higher-order capabilities of excellent teachers. Further, teacher tests have little "predictive validity." That is, even if a common definition of competency existed, there is little evidence to support a correlation between test performance and job performance (Ayers, 1988; Dybdahl, Shaw, & Edwards, 1997; Garcia & Garcia, 1989; Hyman, 1984). And finally, some educators in Massachusetts concluded that the MECT, developed by National Evaluation Systems, appears to be technically flawed (Haney, Fowler, & Wheelock, 1999; Melnick & Pullin, 1999)[2]. In sum, rather than improving the teacher work force as the state policy intended, teacher education programs in Massachusetts may be altering their coursework in a way that weakens the preparation of prospective teachers.

A second unexpected outcome resulting from the Massachusetts initial teacher testing program is that colleges may be reducing their applicant pools in order to increase their pass rates. Teacher colleges have the power to discern which students are "valid candidates" (internal Fitchburg State College memo, July 10, 1999). This means that prior to administering the MECT, colleges can decide which of their students are "affiliated" with the institution. Evidence already exists that indicates many Massachusetts colleges are finding ways to screen students out of their numbers, clearly to better protect themselves (e.g., Spakes, March 9, 2000). Thus there is an incentive built into the policy to exclude any students who might jeopardize a school's chances of meeting its 80% pass rate.

Overall, the weight of the test may be altering what and how teacher education programs teach in ways that may not be in the long-term best interest of new teachers or their future students. Furthermore, the 80% pass rate criteria for colleges may be causing their education programs to exclude harder to educate teacher candidates in an effort to maximize their pass rates. The end result could not only be fewer prospective teachers, but

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[2] Many have called for an independent outside review of the MECT, but so far, state officials have largely dismissed these concerns and have publicly defended the quality of the tests.

fewer teachers with less training in areas that really matter (National Research Council, 2000).

Consequences for Prospective Teachers

Let's assume for the moment that our concerns are unfounded, i.e., that these tests are a valid measure of teacher competency and that the colleges are making changes that will ultimately improve teacher preparation as a result of impending sanctions. Will this policy yield the quality and number of teachers needed in Massachusetts? We think not for two additional reasons.

First, the degrading manner in which teachers have been viewed since the inception of these tests in 1998 may have served to discourage, rather than encourage, college graduates to join the teaching force. Thomas Finneran, the Speaker of the House in Massachusetts, called those who failed "idiots" (Bradley, 1998, p. 31). In a commentary that he wrote for The New York Times, John Silber actually reprinted spelling errors and other mistakes that some test takers had made, and he argued that these prospective teachers have no business in the classroom (Silber, 1998, p. A15). Many other commentators in the media joined the public ridicule. Some commentators asserted that the brightest students are not entering the teaching field, pointing not only to the failure rates on the teacher certification tests, but also to many education colleges that have lower SAT scores than average (Olson, 2000). Summing up the situation, Education Week proclaimed, "Aspiring teachers in Massachusetts became the butt of jokes when more than half failed a new series of tests" (Bradley, 1998, p. 30).

This negative impact on the teacher supply might be most severe among minority populations. Minorities in several states throughout the U.S., on average, have not performed as well on teacher certification tests as whites. The NCTE Task Force (1987) reported:

> There is overwhelming evidence that current written tests are having a dramatic impact on minority teachers...There are various explanations as to why so many minority teachers do poorly on these tests. Yet whatever the reasons, the results

present a bleak future for black public school teachers in America's classrooms. (pp. 186-87)

Several studies have come to similar conclusions regarding the adverse effect of teacher testing on the number of prospective non-white teachers (Garcia, 1985; Gillis 1990-1991; Hood & Parker, 1989). These findings worry some educators, who fear that too many minorities are being shut out of classrooms because of standardized testing. They say the MECT is not a valuable enough gauge of effective teaching to justify losing the benefits of a diverse teaching pool.

Given the growing diversity of the student population in the U.S. and the Commonwealth of Massachusetts in particular (there are currently 110 languages spoken in bilingual classes across Massachusetts, MDOE, 1994), having a workforce which reflects that diversity is of grave importance. African-American, Latino, and Asian students make up about 22% of the Commonwealth's student population. This percentage of minority students is substantially higher than the percentage of minority teachers (Henke, Choy, Geis, & Broughman, 1996, p. 5). The need for a diverse workforce will continue to rise; by 2030 and 2040, some predict that racial/ethnic minority students will make up nearly 50% of the nation's public school children (Olson, 2000).

In keeping with the national pattern, minorities have failed the Massachusetts teacher tests at a higher rate than whites (see Table 1). None of the 29 African-American students who took the first administration of the tests in April 1998 passed all the sections (Melnick & Pullin, 1999, p. 5). At Fitchburg State College, an in-house analysis revealed that the cumulative pass rate on the first two test administrations for an admittedly small number of minority students was 17%, while the pass rate for our non-minority students was 47% (Carroll, 1998). Additionally, a more recent in-house analysis at Fitchburg State revealed that during the 1998-1999 program year no black students passed, while the pass rate for Hispanic students was only 44%, but 70% for white students who took both the reading and writing tests (Carroll, 2000). State leaders and test developers have assured the

public that the test is not racially biased, but regardless of the reason for the higher failures, educators are concerned about the long-term impact on the diversity of the teaching pool.

(Insert Table 1 about here)

Minority teachers in Massachusetts will likely be harder to find in the future. Given the pressure on colleges to show high pass rates and the relatively low pass rates of minorities, colleges will have an incentive to exclude prospective minority teachers. In addition, the booming U.S. economy offers minorities more lucrative career opportunities elsewhere (Olson, 2000). Therefore, it seems unlikely that the diversity of the teaching pool in Massachusetts will keep pace with the rapidly changing student demographics.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we have found that the seemingly logical basis of the teacher testing policy in Massachusetts has led to consequences in the state's colleges and within its prospective teaching pool that run counter to the policy's intent. While this is a relatively new initiative, early indications suggest that teacher preparatory colleges are altering, or at least adjusting, their curriculum emphases to teach to a test of dubious validity and perhaps inadvertently excluding substantial portions of their enrollment in an effort to boost their test scores. Specifically, minority students appear to be failing the Massachusetts teacher certification tests at higher rates than their majority counterparts. More broadly, the negative publicity surrounding these tests has done little to improve the public perception of teaching.

While the push for quality is a worthy goal, it needs to be tempered with the state's demand for more qualified teachers. Education Week (Olson, 2000) reported that the U.S. will need to recruit nearly 2 million teachers in the next decade. The national shortage of teachers — particularly in math, the sciences, and bilingual education — is well documented. Massachusetts, too, appears to be facing a potential problem with shortages (Melnick & Pullin, 1999). Therefore, we are concerned that teacher certification tests may be closing the door on too many qualified prospects.

The significance of these issues should be of concern for all of us involved in higher education and educational policy. In our quest to improve teacher quality through teacher testing, we may be denying opportunities to potentially good teachers due to their poor test-taking skills. While there is no evidence to suggest that the recent crop of post-MECT teachers is more qualified than in previous years, we do know that the quantity of certified teachers is down. In short, we conclude that the teacher testing policy in Massachusetts appears to be a classic case of the "tail wagging the dog."

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Table 1

Cumulative Data: MECT Passing Rates in Percentages

April 1998 and July 1998 Combined Administrations

	Black	Asian/ Pacific Islander	Hispanic	White
Communication & Literacy Skills: Reading	46.2	76.6	55.7	81.0
Communication & Literacy Skills: Writing	38.8	69.2	46.3	77.1
Communication & Literacy Skills: Passed Both Tests	29.2	67.2	40.5	69.7
Early Childhood Education	0	62.5	40.0	71.6
Elementary Teacher	20.8	71.4	50.0	66.1
Middle School Teacher	0	50.0	—	73.2

Data from this table has been taken from the Annual Summary of Examinee Passing Rates By Test: Cumulative For All Examinees By Gender, Ethnicity, And Educational Status, Program Year: 1997-1998 (Massachusetts Department of Education, 1998).